

# Into the deep

## 2

The small party rode through the fields near the north edge of Margden Woods, and the going was light. It was now early spring, and the snows that had fallen when they were in Little Hollow had melted again. There was a slight drizzle of cold rain, and they were all wrapped tightly in their cloaks. Melvin on his pony rode in the middle of the column, and now and then Mariel checked on him.

They were underway towards Ironforge, and everyone was alert, their weapons ready at hand. Sir Jean suddenly dismounted, and started to study some remains of an old campfire, and a trail leading from it. "Hobgoblins," he told them, and pointed out where the trail went. "A pack of them, maybe even even a tribe. If we keep up this pace we might overtake them tomorrow."

Grimm harrumphed. "Good. We can take 'em."

They continued, and indeed the next day they came upon the campsite of the goblins. This time, Grimm came upon evidence that there might have been a bugbear with the goblins, and he was proven right later that day. It was nearing sunset when there was a great cheering and howling from the undergrowth. The landscape was hilly, and if there was a good place for an ambush, it would have been this place, the only place for miles around where the hobgoblins and bugbears could hide their numbers. Mariel, Melvin, and Grimm dismounted, each preparing for the imminent attack. Sir Jean stayed on his horse, a huge mount that wore full battle-armor and was prancing excitedly.

The goblins and bugbears fought hard, but in the end they succumbed to the combined forces. Sir Jean charged with his mount and hacked at the enemy, Grimm waded into the midst of a group of bugbears and slew them one by one, while Melvin cast a powerful spell, which transformed a small area into something that looked like it was a storm from the mountains. Ice and snow, heavy winds, and goblins being crushed by the hails where they weren't frozen to death. Melvin called it an "Ice Storm", and even Grimm nodded approval.

As she was healing Grimm, Mariel's eye fell on a track in the grass. It lead away from the campsite, towards a shadowed valley a few miles away. She pointed it out to Sir Jean, mounted Para, and followed it.

"Where're you going?" Grimm called after them.

"I found another trail." Mariel called back, and continued her way. After a little while, she looked over her shoulder and saw they were all following her, Sir Jean closely behind.

When they crested the hill, Mariel halted in astonishment. She slid off Para, and motioned for the others to catch up with her. Sir Jean was the first to arrive, and when he saw what she had stopped for, he drew his sword.

"So that is where the rest of the tribe went to. They must have sent the scouting party to find us and take care of us."

"Can we take them?" asked Mariel, just as Grimm caught up and dismounted as well.

"Ah, it's only a few hundred of 'em. And not too many bugbears either. Should be a piece of cake." said Grimm.

With Melvin's help, it was. Oh, sure, the others did a lot of damage too, Sir Jean galloping around the battlefield and dispersing the ranks of goblins and helping out Grimm with the bugbears where necessary. Mariel cast some offensive spells as well, but mainly tried to keep her friends alive and doing a fair job at it too. In the end, the last of the goblins fled, and those who could no longer flee were either dead or would be soon. Grimm checked some of the bugbears, and came back clutching some silver coins and a longbow. He pocketed the coins and held the bow out to Mariel. "Could you use this? It's in fair shape."

"Thanks Grimm, I might." Mariel replied, remembering what Grimm had said about needing good gear.

"Melvin is salvaging some arrows, I asked him to collect a quiver for you. How's Sir Jean?"

Mariel patted the last bandage, on his arm. "He is fine, but we need to rest. I've healed most of his wounds, but this will heal fast enough by itself."

Grimm nodded, and put the longbow on Para's pack. When he turned back around, he noticed Sir Jean held Mariel in his arms.

"She fainted." he explained, looking a bit silly. Mariel was indeed unconscious. "She is not used to battle, I suppose."

"Let's set up camp half a mile north." Grimm suggested. "If you carry her, I'll notify Melvin and bring the horses, that is, if your mount will let me touch his bridle."

"He will follow, no doubt." said Sir Jean. "Should I not try to wake her?"

"Be gentle." Grimm grinned in his beard, and turned to collect the horses.

They camped a good bit away from the slaughter, untroubled by the ravens or smells of the dead goblins. The next morning they continued their way, and when they came to the next valley, they came upon another battlefield where a great many men lay slain. All were human, and there were a lot of dead horses there as well. Mariel skirted around the edges, and her eye fell on a piece of parchment fluttering in the breeze. She took it, and read the contents. It was a letter to the council of elves of Margden Woods, asking them to make great haste and come to Ironforge on a matter of great urgency.

Mariel called over the rest, and told them the contents of the letter. "If these were messengers and they are all slain, then there is no one to deliver this. Perhaps we should go to Margden Woods and deliver this before anything else." Mariel said. Grimm looked doubtful, and Melvin shook his head in disagreement.

Her eye fell on a small trail, maybe no bigger than that of a passing deer. "Wait. Sir Jean, look. Another trail."

Mariel mounted immediately, and they cantered down the trail, following it as best they could. It was hard to follow, but here and there Mariel noticed small red drops glistening on the high grass. When they crested another hill, they stopped and looked



below.

Hidden in the small valley, near a patch of trees, were two large tents. They looked human-made, at least, so that might be a good sign. They cantered down the hill, and Sir Jean made a flanking movement. Mariel and Grimm dismounted, Mariel going left around the tents, Grimm right.

When Grimm came around the tent, he saw a rider, who had clearly just mounted. Mariel had been slightly faster than he had, and the rider was facing her. From the looks of it, he was ready to charge her, and he wore full battle gear and a helmet with the visor down.

"We're good folk." Mariel said.

The rider didn't respond, but sat his horse in perfect quiet. The horse flicked its ears restlessly. Mariel cleared her throat, and continued. "We came upon a tribe of hobgoblins and bugbears yesterday, and killed them. This morning, when we continued our road we found another battlefield, with a lot of slain humans. I found this there."

She took out the parchment, but the rider still didn't respond.

"My name is Mariel Morningsun, and I am from Margden Woods. May I ask you to raise your visor and introduce yourself?"

That moment, Sir Jean rode into view again, having circled the encampment. The unknown rider slowly turned his head to Sir Jean, and followed him. Then, finally, he slowly moved an arm to his helmet and raised his visor.

"My name is Amaris."

"Well met." Mariel said. "What brings you here?"

"I was sent from Ironforge to bring word to the Council of Elves, on a dire mission."

As quietly and politely as he spoke, Amaris was still ready to charge Mariel if she were to prove herself hostile. He did not relax at all, and only tensed more when Sir Jean rode into view. Mariel decided it was time to break the tension. By dancing around with words, they would probably never figure out if the other party was to be trusted. Even though his helmet obscured his ears, from his features that were visible she was pretty sure he was an elf as well. She didn't know him, but instinctively she felt she could trust him. She pulled the parchment free completely, and slowly walked over to Amaris, Grimm frowning at her as she did so.

"Then you will need this back. Please." she offered it to him, and then took a step back as he took it from her hands. "I do not think you need two tents for just yourself, you must have companions."

"They were wounded." said Amaris tersely.

"Can I offer assistance? I am a cleric of Ehlonna, and skilled in the arts of healing."

Amaris finally relaxed, and dismounted, patting his horse on the neck. He showed Mariel to a tent, where two more elves in armour lay, both heavily wounded. Mariel went inside, and immediately busied herself with their wounds, carefully taking off their armour so she could look at the damage done by the tribe of hobgoblins.

When she exited the tent again, she saw Sir Jean talking with Amaris and another elf in armour. He was, like Amaris, more than handsome, and the two of them made even Sir Jean - who was quite handsome for a human - look very plain. Intrigued, Mariel walked over and gave the elves an update on the condition of their friends.

"They're stable, and most of their wounds are healed. I advised them to get some rest, but I almost had to tie them down to make them keep to their beds." Mariel looked at Amaris, and continued. "Perhaps you could convince them that they need to rest and regain their strength before you continue your journey."

Amaris curtly nodded and turned towards the tent. When he left, Sir Jean introduced her to the other elf. "Mariel, this is Lorian."

*They had a picnic in Little Hollow, and Lorian had bought some wine, the first wine she ever drank. When the sun sank beneath the rooftops, they had enjoyed a romantic dinner on the grass. Mariel felt strange, affected by the wine, yet somehow there was more to the feelings in the pit of her stomach than alcohol, she knew.*

The elf inclined his head, and formally greeted her.

*Lorian had been whispering to Sir Jean, but not quiet enough. Mariel had caught the words, and now she exploded in anger at Lorian, pushing in between him and Sir Jean.*

*"I do not need him to take care of me!" she said angrily.*

*"Don't be ridiculous, you almost died, and you're still shaken from the experience, Mariel." Lorian replied. Behind her, Sir Jean left the room.*

*"I - am - fine!" Mariel said, emphasizing each word.*

*"Right. That's why you're still mostly catatonic, and half of what is said to you, you don't even hear."*

Mariel blinked at the elf in front of her. Was this Lorian?

*Finally, Lorian turned to her. Sir Jean still stood protectively by her side, still protecting her from the big bad world as Lorian had asked of him.*

*"And you?" Lorian asked her.*

*"So glad you would ask for my help too." Mariel said icily.*

*"I'm not asking for your help, I am asking what you're going to do." Lorian sighed.*

*"Well then, if you don't need me, I'll be outside."*

*That was the last time she saw Lorian, for he went into the tower to never come out alive again.*

It took longer for her to recover this time. It was as if the ground under her feet had delved away, like she was falling into a bottomless pit. Grimm was already casting worried glances her way. Sir Jean was frowning thoughtfully.

"I am sorry." Mariel said, shaking her head clear from the memories of her vision.

"Mariel, is everything alright?" Grimm asked, and he joined them.

"Yes, yes. I would like to speak to Lorian, alone please. If you don't mind?" she asked Lorian, who nodded politely and walked with her to a quiet place a little bit farther from where Melvin was building a campfire. Sir Jean sauntered over to Melvin, but Grimm stayed with Lorian and Mariel.

When Mariel sat down, Lorian followed suit, but Grimm remained standing. Mariel looked up at him.

"Grimm, please. If you want I will tell you what this is about later." Mariel said. "But right now I need to talk to Lorian alone. Please?"

Grimm shrugged, and walked away, after casting one worried frown her way. When they were finally alone, Mariel looked at Lorian and sighed.

"I don't know where to start." she confessed.

"Wherever you would like." Lorian said. His voice was melodious, and he took off his helmet as well, revealing that he was indeed an elf, and as handsome as she had suspected.

"I shall start at the beginning then." Mariel said. "I lived in the sanctuary of Ehlonna in Margden Woods, and there I had a vision. In that vision my companions and I were sent to stop a demon from becoming a God. I set out to find those companions, and though I couldn't find all of them, I found Grimm, Melvin, Sir Jean and Thamior - the latter did not choose to join us." Mariel paused, and rubbed her temple with one hand, avoiding Lorian's gaze. "In that vision I fell in love with a man, but because he tried to protect me I -" she broke off. "I was responsible for his death. He went into a tower we suspected was the home of a necromancer, and I let him go in, and left. He -- he died."

She looked at Lorian again, and saw he was waiting for her to speak, whenever she was ready.

"I think that this Lorian from my vision was you." she said at last. "And I am sorry, I am so sorry I left you to die there. I have wished a thousand times, in that vision and in real life as well that I had acted differently, but that was not to be. An action, once taken, can not be undone. None of us have the power to restore the dead back to life once they become something unnatural. But I wished I could, and I am - so - sorry."

Mariel was crying now, tears streaming from her eyes, afraid to even look at Lorian. Now that she had confessed to him, she was scared of what he might say or do to her, and she dared not meet his eyes. She buried her face in her hands and sat sobbing for a while, until she felt a soft touch on her shoulder.

Lorian had moved to sit next to her, and laid his arm around her carefully. She leaned into his embrace, and he held her for a long time, until her tears were spent and she could cry no more. Then, he lifted her chin and wiped away her tears.

"Hush, now. I too have had a vision. And in it, you did wonderful things." Lorian said, and comforted her.

"Can you ever forgive me?" Mariel asked.

"It never happened." Lorian whispered. "But if it ease your mind, I am not wroth with you."

Through her tears, Mariel smiled.

"Here." Lorian said, and pulled a ring from his smallest finger. "I want you to have this. Promise me you will wear it."

He took her hand, and lay the small gold band in it, closing the fingers over it.

"I will not take it off." Mariel said, and slipped the ring onto her left hand.

"Are you comforted?" Lorian asked, and in his eyes there was another question he could not - should not ask.

"Yes, I am. Thank you." Mariel said. "Please forgive me. I should not have let myself go as I did."

"Your halfling friend has prepared us a nice dinner we should eat. I think he will be displeased with you if you were to skip it."

When they came closer to the campfire, Mariel noticed a new person had arrived. In the flickering light of the fire, she noticed he was a half-elf, and he wore rugged, worn clothes. She motioned to Grimm, who came over to her hurriedly.

"Who's the half-breed?" Mariel asked quietly, and Grimm shrugged.

"His name is Aaron, and he just arrived here after you walked away. Amaris isn't too happy to have him in the camp, and Aaron said he would sleep in the copse, so as not to bother us. He said he just wanted some company. What did you two talk about?"

"I will tell you later." Mariel said, and joined the party near the fire. Melvin handed her dinner, and she noticed that Aaron sat glaring at her as if he overheard her words. Perhaps he had. When they had finished their food, he stood up, and bade them goodnight, disappearing in the shadows. They would not see him again for a long time.

"We shall go our way in the morning." Amaris spoke. "Our mission is urgent, and our paths will part here."

"We should leave early ourselves." Sir Jean said. "Ironforge is still a week's ride away, and the sooner we get there, the sooner we can continue with our own mission."

The next morning, the camp was bustling with activity. The wounded men had healed quickly thanks to Mariel's attentions, and



had already put on their armour. Lorian was busy breaking down tents, when Sir Jean came galloping back from his scouting. "I ran across more hobgoblins, and they are headed this way. Half a tribe, perhaps."

Immediately, Amaris gathered the horses of his companions, and the four elves, all mounted, joined Sir Jean. Melvin, Mariel and Grimm stayed on foot; not having been trained to fight from horseback, they would be better off on the ground. Even Mariel, who had some skill in riding a horse, had no desire to ride through the ranks of goblins to try and get to the wounded, because she couldn't be sure Para wouldn't toss her off in fright in the middle of a fight.

The goblins raised a battle cry when they saw them, and Grimm laughed and cheered at them. "Bring it on, you suckers!"

All in all, it was a short fight. The elves and Sir Jean rode in a group, slashing at the heads of the goblins left and right. Melvin cast Fireballs and Ice Storms wherever he could, and though Grimm was hurt a little, he inflicted more damage than he took. Soon, they stood panting, surrounded by dead hobgoblins, and the last fleeing goblins were hunted down by Amaris.

Mariel had had her share in the fight; she had cast a spell that rained down divine fire from the sky. It hadn't been easy to cast, but this Flame Strike exacted its toll from the goblins. It had also cost her a great deal of strength, and when she had just healed the wounds on Grimm, she fainted again, exhausted from the work she had done.

Lorian dismounted and ran to her side, and ignored Grimm as he lifted her in his arms.

"Hey! You shouldn't move her, she is unconscious!" Grimm said.

"I will just take her back to the camp, where she will be more comfortable."

"You don't know that. Now put her down!" Grimm said.

Sighing, Lorian carefully put Mariel back down, and turned back to his companions. When Mariel came to a few minutes later, the elves had struck camp completely and stood ready to ride on to Margden Woods. Their goodbyes were swift, and Mariel had the distinct impression that Lorian was offended. She took a few moments alone with him, but what she had said to him, or his reply, she could not remember afterwards, all she remembered was the way he had looked at her.

A week later, they came to the gates of Andorhall, one of the dwarven halls that surrounded Ironforge. Grimm showed them the way, and they ended up in a war room, where a large, heavily muscled dwarf sat on a throne.

"Chief! These are my friends, Sir Jean, Mariel Morningsun, and Melvin Greatfoot. Guys, this is the Chief."

Sir Jean nodded politely, and Mariel followed suit. The Chief came down from the throne, and clasped Grimm into a brotherly embrace, armour clanging against armour.

"This calls for a drink!" the Chief said, and waved at one of his attendants to bring dwarven ale. When they all held a tankard, they toasted, and Grimm and the Chief quaffed the entire tankard in one go. Even Sir Jean drank deeply from the tankard, and Mariel, not wanting to insult the Chief or his hospitality, sipped carefully. The tales of dwarven ale were well-known, and she knew it was one of the most heady drinks one could taste. She didn't particularly like the taste of it, it was very dark and heavy, and the alcohol lay thick in the taste as well as the smell of it. Nevertheless, she tried to be polite, and drank a quarter of the tankard before she put it down on the table they had gone to sit at. Grimm spoke with his Chief about the mithril, and when the talk was over, they were shown to quarters, where Mariel, already quite intoxicated with the ale, fell into a deep reverie.

At breakfast the next morning, Grimm announced it would take the Chief two days to get the mithril ready for shipment. A dwarf would accompany them to drive the cart to Little Hollow.

"That should give me some time to visit the temple of Ehlonna in Ironforge." Mariel said. "I don't know where it is though."

"I do." said Sir Jean. "And I have been planning a visit to the temple of Heironeous myself. It lies with the temple of Ehlonna in the temple district. We could go there together, unless you two wish to come along?"

Melvin and Grimm politely declined, and Mariel and Sir Jean set out after a late breakfast, arriving at the temple of Heironeous in the early afternoon. Curious of how the temple of Heironeous would look, Mariel asked if she could come inside with Sir Jean. He lead the way, and held the door open for her.

The temple itself was a huge building, high-domed and light, with white stones and marble floors. In the main chamber was a statue of Heironeous, with his shining sword raised high in a gesture that inspired courage in all that gazed upon it. Mariel felt awed by the building and the inside, and at first didn't notice the high priest coming over to greet them.

The high priest had welcomed Sir Jean and he looked at Mariel. His face changed abruptly, into recognition and amazement, and before Mariel knew what was happening, he was on his knees before her, head bowed.

Mariel did the only thing she knew to do when someone would submit themselves so before her, and taking the high priests' head in her hands, she spoke words of blessing. When she had done she took the high priests' shoulders and urged him to stand up.

"Please, that is not necessary. Please." Mariel said.

He looked her in her eyes, and he was still looking overawed. When Sir Jean touched his arm, the spell was broken though, and he showed them into a side chamber, where they could talk. The high priest introduced himself as Johan.

"When I recognized you, I was surprised. I have had a vision." said Johan. "You are the one who will deliver us from the demon."

Mariel looked at Sir Jean, and shrugged. "I do not know what you are talking about. I am but a simple cleric of Ehlonna."

"Though I too have had a vision." said Sir Jean. "And it spoke of a demon prince as well."

"And I." said Mariel. "When I was still in Margden Woods I have had a dream of this demon prince. Sermon, the high priest of Ehlonna, explained that the dream was sign that I should find the friends from the dream, and get together, prepare for this epic

battle that is to come."

"We came together in Little Hollow." said Sir Jean, "Currently, we are preparing to go follow the first clue we have to the whereabouts of someone who might have something to do with this."

They talked more for a little while, but Johan didn't have much news concerning his vision or the demon prince. At last, Mariel stood up and excused herself.

"I came to Ironforge to visit the temple of Ehlonna. If you will excuse me, I shall go there now."

"Of course." Johan stood up as well.

"I have one last boon I ask. Do you know an elf named Lorian?" Mariel asked.

"Yes, he is a cleric of Heironeous, and comes here from time to time."

"Could you please deliver this to him?" Mariel asked, and pulled a letter from her pouch and handed it to Johan.

Mariel went to the temple of Ehlonna, which was adjacent to the temple of Heironeous. It looked very different though. The temple grounds were a great garden, and trees grew there, of every shape and size. Near the entrance of the temple grounds were two archon hounds, standing guard. Mariel greeted them politely, and took off her shoes, leaving them with the hounds. When she looked back, the shoes were gone so that no-one might steal them, and the hounds were waiting faithfully at the entrance.

Inside the temple grounds, she ran into the high priestess. Mariel sank to her knees, but the priestess pulled her to her feet again, and introduced herself as Regalia. The woman was an elder elf, yet still beautiful, and she looked a strong woman, as supple and strong as a tree. Her dark hair was nearly black and spilled down her back, a waterfall of curling locks.

"Welcome to the temple, child. What is it you seek here?"

"Peace, and a chance to be among the trees again." Mariel sighed. "It has been so long since I saw the Great Trees of Margden Woods, and I miss them."

"Come then." said Regalia. "You can pray here, and speak with other followers of Ehlonna."

Regalia walked with her to a place deep in the temple grounds, where the trees grew high overhead, and flowers, shrubs and bushes grew. Peace and tranquility dominated the place. Mariel inhaled the fragrant air of moist earth and sprouting leaves.

"Perhaps you would like to say a prayer and a blessing. I know you've not been here before, but if we worship together you will feel right at home."

"I already do." answered Mariel, and she smiled at the high priestess. Together they began to walk in the garden, two elf women in long robes, their bare feet on the grass and the earth alike. Soon, they were joined by others, elves mostly, who listened to their mass and prayed with them.

When they were done, Regalia turned to Mariel and blessed her. "There is one thing I wish to ask of you." Regalia said.

"I would gladly help you, if I can." Mariel said.

"Take the archon hounds, and play with them under the trees. They do not have much time to relax, but they deserve a break."

Mariel smiled, and gladly obliged.

It was an hour later, when she was rolling around in the grass, wrestling with one of the archon hounds for a fallen branch they had been playing with, when Mariel heard someone clear his throat. When she looked up she saw it was Sir Jean.

"Ah, Sir Jean. I was just..." she laughed "...helping the hounds relax."

Sir Jean helped her up, and took some leaves from her hair.

"I must look like I've been tumbling on the forest floor." Mariel said. "Well, I have. So be it. Maybe it is best Johan does not see me again, or he will take back his kind words."

"Are you ready to go?" Sir Jean asked.

"Yes, yes. I will just say goodbye to my friends here, and Regalia, and I will come along with you."

The journey back to Little Hollow was uneventful, up to a certain point. The driver of the cart was a dwarf who was even less talkative than Grimm. Melvin had tied Zack to the back of the cart, and sat next to the precious shipment, his crossbow at the ready. They held watch with two at a time, the driver the only one sleeping a full night - except for Mariel, who only needed four hours of reverie to awaken refreshed.

It was one such night that Mariel and Grimm had the second watch. Mariel had told Grimm about her little talk with Lorian, though she left out the details.

"So you think this Lorian chap is the guy from your vision."

"Well, yes." Mariel said. "I think so."

"He didn't much look like it." Grimm said. "For starters, he's an elf, and a cleric."

"Well, look at Ogdin and Mirodan. They were different from the vision too. I don't see why everything should be the same as the vision. I look different too."

Grimm was silent for a while. "So, what makes you trust him?"

"Well, he's an elf. And he was very nice to me."

"Mariel, for crying out loud! You don't know anything about the guy, you just met him! There's no reason why he should be friendly or care about your well-being."

Mariel was going to answer, but Grimm held out his hand in a gesture that told her to shut up. Apparently, he heard it again.

"Wake Sir Jean and help him into his armour as fast as you can. I'll wake Melvin."



Sir Jean was at once awake when he saw the sun was just coming up. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know, Grimm heard something." Mariel said, and focused on getting the breastplate on right. There was little time left, because before Sir Jean could buckle on his greaves, Grimm called out to them.

When Mariel came over to him, Grimm pointed with his axe towards where a shape was moving. It was hardly visible in the first light of dawn, but wherever the beast moved into the light, it became even harder to see.

"Hellcats." Mariel hissed. There were three of them.

"We're lucky they attack before it is completely light." said Sir Jean. "They're invisible in daylight."

It was indeed hard to follow the hellcats, their shapes mildly reminiscent of a lion. They blended with the background wherever they stepped into the sunlight, and their contours were a blur. With a wail, one launched itself into an attack, and a second later the other one followed as well.

Mariel took her holy symbol, that she ever wore around her neck, and held it out to the hellcat that charged in front. She closed her eyes, and concentrated a moment, and when she opened them again they were set in grim determination. She spoke the invocation that would Banish the hellcat back to wherever it would have come from, and when she finished, the cat was gone in mid-stride. Only then she exhaled and dared to blink.

The second one now changed course, and came straight for her, but Sir Jean jumped in front of her and caught the claws of the beast on his shield, tossing the hellcat down to the ground. For a moment, the hellcat was invisible, but when Sir Jean cleaved its skull open with his sword, it was more than obvious where the beast had been.

They turned to the last hellcat. Grimm was taunting it, daring it to come over, but it saw what happened to the others, and stayed at a distance, not daring to come near. It was at this moment, when everyone was watching the prowling beast stalk around them, when suddenly Sir Jean was jumped from behind. A fourth hellcat had stayed out of sight, sneaking closer to them while they focused on the others. The hellcat hung to Sir Jean's armour, and one of its claws had taken hold in a crevice under his armpit, where there was little protection. Mariel could see Sir Jean was bleeding heavily, but there was nothing she could do about it while the hellcat was still clinging to Sir Jean's back.

After a moment's struggle Sir Jean managed to toss the hellcat over his shoulder, where Grimm stood waiting with his axe. He struck the beast with all its strength, but the rays of the sun had momentarily cloaked the shape of the hellcat, and what Grimm thought would be a critical blow only glanced the flank. The beast hurriedly got up, and attacked Sir Jean again. Grimm was on to it now, though, and with an underhand swipe buried his axe in the soft belly of the beast. It didn't take long for Sir Jean to finish off the last hellcat, which had charged at last in a desperate frenzy.

Before Mariel could even see to Sir Jean's wounds, or Grimm could take a closer look at the bodies of the hellcats, there was a loud voice in their heads. Mariel clutched her head in both hands as the voice spoke.

"YOU are NOTHING!" the voice thundered. "and you will be destroyed if you do not join the winning side! The first gate of hell is opened..."

When the voice fell silent, she opened her eyes again, and saw that Melvin was also holding his hands to his head, and even Grimm was leaning on his axe slightly, shaking his head as if there was an annoying sound in his ear.

"Did you hear that as well?" Melvin asked, and they nodded.

"Is it true?" asked Grimm.

"It might just be bluff," said Sir Jean, "but it might not be. There's no way of knowing for sure until we run into creatures from there, or the gate itself."

"And there's no knowing where it might be." Mariel pondered.

"I'm going to see if the driver's alright." Grimm announced, and opened up the tent flap. "Well, I'll be... Hey! Wake your lazy ass up."

"He slept right through it? Unbelievable" Melvin said, and shook his head. "Breakfast, anyone?"

They arrived in Little Hollow a few days later, where the mithril was brought to the smithy, and Grimm set to work. The hours were long and tedious, and Melvin had started to fret more and more, anxious to get at his girlfriend's murderer and spoon his heart out.

A few days after arriving, Mariel was called to the smithy for a fitting.

"Come Mariel, you will need armour as well, you know that." Sir Jean had chided her.

"But I took a vow of poverty, renouncing worldly possessions that are not necessary for my work for Ehlonna."

"Be that as it may, Ehlonna knows that if you go into battle wearing armour, you will be better protected while doing your work." Sir Jean had replied, and Grimm had harrumphed at her silliness and strapped a breastplate on her, shown her where to close it, and how to put it on. Sir Jean had been most persuasive, and finally she had accepted the armour. It was very shiny, and on the breastplate was a huge feather, Grimm's trademark.

"After all," Sir Jean reminded her, and grinned. "You would not want to let Johan down, now would you?"

Sir Jean seemed to take Johan calling Mariel 'their savior' as another cue that she needed a good armour to protect her. He and Grimm had not taken 'no' for an answer, and there she was in her new shining mithril armour.

On the last day in Little Hollow, when Grimm was finishing the greaves of her armour and he had no need for her to fit the armour any more, Mariel and Sir Jean had gone to the market, where he had helped her pay for some nice plants to plant a garden in Ehlonna's honour. They had found a spot for each plant and shrub, and Sir Jean had helped Mariel plant it.

The next day they set out again. Melvin was bouncing cheerfully on Zack's back, happy to be on his way again to avenge the death of Arlies. Mariel sat Para a bit uncomfortably. Grimm had shown her how to strap the armour on, and Sir Jean had given her some handy tips about riding in armour, but it definitely needed some getting used to. There were bits she didn't know the proper name of poking into bits that were very unused to being poked.

Sir Jean led the way. He had gathered some information while Grimm was working on his mithril, and found a possible connection to ZA: an alledged dungeon a few day's ride from Little Hollow. They all kept their eyes open for any more surprises, but the days they spent on horseback were very uneventful. Slowly, very slowly, Mariel learned to adjust her armour to a better fit, so that even on horseback, she was only slightly uncomfortable. There were blisters forming in unmentionable places, but she padded them with bits of cloth so it didn't rub as much anymore. At night when Melvin was cooking, she touched the ring Lorian gave her, deep in thought.

They arrived at a more forested area after a few day's ride. The trees were small compared to the great trees of Ehlonna's sanctuaries, but Mariel sighed with relief when there were branches over her head. She would probably never get used to cities, and always be happier outdoors, preferably in a forest.

Only when her gaze left the branches did she see where they had arrived. There was a rough oval shape built in bricks, with a stone obelisk reaching towards the sky. The building, if it could be called that, was half-overgrown with climbweed and brambles, but the shape was clear even through the undergrowth.

"Let's circle around it." Grimm suggested. Mariel nodded, and steered Para towards the right side of the ruins. Sir Jean dismounted and started to rummage around inside the oval, looking at the obelisk a bit more closely.

Around the ruins there was nothing to be seen but big trees and the occasional upturned earth, but it could not be called a path or a track. It might have been a human foot or an orcish one as well as a deer's hoof that had disturbed the earth in places, or maybe even tremors of the earth, as Grimm pointed out. It was too sparse to be sure, too random to be definite, and too old to put a date to.

When they returned to Melvin, they saw Sir Jean talking to someone. Mariel dismounted as well, gathering the horses together. And only then did she recognise who Sir Jean was talking to. She groaned softly, hoping he'd not hear.

"And what is he doing here?" Grimm said, as he joined Sir Jean.

"Grimm, you remember Aaron?" said Sir Jean, as an unnecessary introduction and a way to keep the conversation from turning ugly really fast.

"Hiya guys." Aaron said. "Anyway, I know the way in. It leads to an underground tunnel. I could be your guide inside, I've got a good nose and good reflexes, and you're probably going to need a dungeoneer if you're going in there."

"You said there were creatures entering and exiting?" Sir Jean asked.

"Yep. Every four days, give or take. A tribe of hobgoblins, mostly, and some bugbears with them."

"We've seen them." said Melvin, who was chewing some crusts of bread. "We made sure they wouldn't bother us anymore."

"What, you killed a tribe or four, maybe five?" said Aaron; "not bloody likely."

"We killed two tribes, but not at the same time. And possibly two dozen bugbears all in all." said Grimm; "That was some time ago."

"Well, as far as I can tell a tribe or two, max, enter and exit at the same time. They come, open the door, go inside. The next day they come out again. I've got the password and all, but we're going to need a bit of light, or a torch right up there."

Aaron pointed at the tip of the obelisk, where there was an oval-shaped hole.

"Not a problem." said Melvin, wiping his hands on his shirt. "I can create a Light, got a nice handy spell for it."

"But we can't take the horses in." Mariel said. "They'd be very distressed underground, and we don't know what we'll run into down there. Who knows what kind of dangers we will encounter." she looked at Sir Jean. "But we can't leave them out here either, can we?"

"Actually we can." Sir Jean replied. "Silver Spirit is a very smart horse, and can lead them to safety if need be. They will be quite safe as long as they can roam free. Pack anything you won't need in there onto them, and take off their bridles."

They set the horses loose, and repacked their backpacks with only the bare necessities. Mariel left the longbow Grimm had picked up for her on the battlefield, and the quiver that came with it, on Para. She packed the thing well, so it would not shake loose or impede Para's movements. After rummaging through her pack, she repacked it so it all fit again, and tied her warm blanket on last. It could be cold underground.

Sir Jean spoke softly to Silver Spirit, and the horse flicked his ears. Then it turned around and rounded up the other horses. As one big herd they cantered off, only to stop when they reached the treeline. Silver Spirit turned around and watched the proceedings.

"Alright," said Aaron. "the key word is supposed to be repeated thrice when the light shines through there. It must be some magic word, because I've never heard the name Bachtor before."

"I have." said Sir Jean. "There was a notice pinned up at the Temple of Heironeous. I remember it warned everyone for this..." he hesitated; "person. It must have been a dire warning, so we must avoid using his name if we can. It will draw his attention. He might be in league with Z.A."

"Agreed." said Mariel.

"What?" Aaron sounded incredulous. "You're saying we can't say..."

"Don't say it!" warned Mariel.



"...this guy's name too much because it'll attract his attention? That's ridiculous!" Aaron scowled at Mariel, who was frowning at him in return.

"Actually, it's just common sense." she replied.

"It is." agreed Sir Jean. "I can not quite remember what the note had said, but I might remember soon. We should try to remain undetected for as long as possible."

Grimm nodded that he agreed with them, and poked Melvin to get on with it. Melvin grinned, and snapped his fingers. A light appeared near the oval, shining through it at an undeterminable point in the ruins.

"May I?" asked Aaron mockingly. "Bachtor, Bachtor, Bachtor." he intoned when Sir Jean nodded his assent. The ground trembled lightly, and then more heavily as a slab of rock tilted upwards. It hinged at some point under the earth, and revealed a very dark hole, and a narrow and steep staircase down into the dungeon.

Grimm hoisted his axe, and stepped onto the staircase.

"Clear." he announced, and stepped down into the darkness. Melvin was next, followed by Mariel and Aaron. Sir Jean took the rear, and was watched by Silver Spirit until the slab closed behind them again after a short time.

Once underground, Melvin snapped his fingers again, and a light appeared on Mariel's quarterstaff. A handy, portable, and magic torch. Grimm had gone forward, without waiting for the others to catch up, and Aaron seemed to be content that someone else took all the risks.

"Aren't you supposed to be up front?" asked Mariel.

Aaron scowled at her, and then waved away her protests. "He looks like he's having fun."

"You said you had been down here," Sir Jean reminded him. "that you snuck in behind the last band of goblins. It might be prudent that you show us the way."

Aaron muttered something foul, and went up front.

The dungeon was straightforward, there was only one way to go. They followed the hallway deeper down into the earth. After a little while, they could hear running water.

Aaron stepped aside, so the others could enter the room, and when they had gone a little further, they could see it was a square room, large enough to hold a number of people. Around the edges of the room was a basin, like a trough, but at one end it was broken, and water was dripping onto the stone floor.

At the end of the room was another door, and Sir Jean followed Grimm towards it. As they stepped towards it, Grimm splashed through a puddle of water. There was a ripple in the puddle, and it spread, against all likelihood, into the trough.

Melvin was the first to notice the shape rising from the water. He shouted for Grimm to do something, and Grimm charged it. It was a water elemental and though Grimm's axe didn't seem to hurt it much, the number of blows that fell onto the water spirit hurt it in the end. The thunderous roar not much unlike a waterfall died away with the last drops and ripples, and all was quiet again.

Aaron was already in the next room. Melvin eyed the water warily, but followed swiftly, as well as the others.

"I think we can assume that our presence is noticed." Mariel whispered.

"Then why are you whispering?" replied Grimm. "We can take care of whatever is in here."

"If you are so sure of that," said a voice from the back of the room. "Then why are you here, dwarf?"

They had entered a great, cavernous room. The back few meters were shaped like a lake, with a stone slab rising from the heart. On the slab was a tall human, with bronze hair falling in waves around his shoulders. He was not ugly to look at, but a twitch around the eyes suggested a personality that one would rather not argue with.

"And who are you?" Grimm asked him.

"You should have turned back when you had the chance." said the man. "You still can, you know. Just turn around and march out that door. It's not like you really stand a chance in here. Best you leave quietly, really."

"We are looking for someone." said Sir Jean. "Rumours say he might have links to this place."

"Really? How marvellous. That is some good detective-work you've done there. I suppose there's really not any evidence whatsoever you base your assumptions on. On the contrary, any ordinary fire-place gossip would have sufficed." The man sneered at Sir Jean. "So ready to believe anything you've been told, as if the world could no more lie than you can."

"Look, are you going to help us or not?" Grimm spat, his axe twitching on his shoulder.

"I see no reason to assist." the man sneered.

"It would greatly help us in our quest." Sir Jean said. "And it would prove your character."

"Hah! Prove my character, you say. To whom, I wonder. After all, anyone who is worth knowing already does know what my intentions are, and I see no reason to, as you so succinctly put it, prove my character to such rabble as you. Indeed, it would prove to be below me to explain my actions and intentions. I shall give you one last chance to leave."

"Or what? You will try and stop us?" Grimm said. The man was getting on his nerves very quickly.

"I don't think it will count as trying. I believe myself to be fully capable of eliminating you and your little party of friends, should the need arise. But then again, I never really expected you to show any sign of intelligence. Nor have you demonstrated to have any now. You really should have left when you had the chance."

With that last sentence, the man made a simple movement of his hands, and a small spark shot from his hands. They dove aside, just in time to escape the fireball blossoming in the midst of their party. Aaron deftly rolled to a corner of the room, and already had one of his pistol-crossbows in his hands.



Mariel had flunked face-down on the floor next to another wall, and got up slowly. Just fast enough to see the man dive into the lake, disappearing under the inky black waters with only a slow stream of bubbles rising to the surface as evidence he was in there.

"Nice chap." Grimm said. "Really the kind of person that I'd love to see dead."

"I do not think he was human." said Sir Jean, backing away from the water and drawing his sword. His eyes were fixed on a large bronze shape beneath the waters, and though he backed away from the lake he never took his eyes off it.

The waters erupted in a shower of droplets, and two giant wings flapped huge waves towards the shoreline. Grimm cursed in his native tongue, and stood ready to engage the large bronze dragon that was now hovering close above him. The talons slashed at his helmet, but he ducked, rolled and hacked at a wing. Sir Jean meanwhile, tried to hit the dragon's chest, but he missed and missed.

Mariel got up, and mumbled the incantation of one of her stronger spells under her breath. Within seconds, she grew to a larger version of herself, with more muscle and strength. She too, joined in the fray, while Melvin was casting Haste on each of his friends and Aaron fired crossbow bolts at the dragon. In the end, it was Sir Jean who drew first blood. He ducked beneath a wing, and managed to land a blow on the thigh of the dragon. He was too late to dive away from the talons, and there was a screeching scrape on his armour. Blood welled up from the knee-joint in his armour, and he turned around, whirling the hurt part of his body away from the dragon.

It was distracted enough for Grimm now, and with a roaring cry Grimm jumped up, landing a harsh blow on the dragon's chest. There was a shriek, and a wild flurry in which the dragon tried to gain altitude to get away from the disgruntled dwarf.

Mariel jumped in, trying to hit the dragon, but it was all too fast. The wings she tried to strike were too mobile, the talons whooshed over her head too fast to anticipate. Luckily, Sir Jean hit more than she did. He and Grimm fought like furies, and finally, with a last sigh, the dragon died and slid into the shallows of the lake. Most of its body was still above water, and Melvin moved in to tap a vial full of its blood, while Mariel tended to the wounds of Grimm and Sir Jean. Aaron was sneaking around in the corners of the room, softly tapping the walls to find any hidden compartments.

There were many halls in the dungeon, some with foes. There was a short struggle with a fire elemental that Melvin and Mariel quickly disposed of, both protected by an Ice Shield so that the elemental could not touch them.

There was some glee when Melvin ran across a kitchen aside from the main hallway.

There was also a very tense moment when they ran across another small lake where a kraken housed. It had grabbed Melvin and was ready to tug the poor sod underwater to drown and possibly eat him. There had been an eerie glow in Melvin's eyes. There was a loud bang and a flash of light, as from the hands of the trapped Melvin came a Lightning Bolt that struck the kraken and through it, Sir Jean, who was captured in another tentacle. It dropped them both and dived under. It didn't resurface again, and they moved on.

They also rescued a small human. He was hanging suspended in the largest web that Mariel had ever seen. His arms and legs were bound by the sticky cobwebs, but soon they hacked him free and Mariel could use her healing on the man.

A little while later he came to, the bruises fading under his skin from the skillful Healing Mariel gave him.

"Is this real?" the man asked.

"Be quiet." Mariel shushed the man. "You've been hurt pretty badly, and I am trying to get you back on your feet. If you stay still for a moment longer, you will be fine again."

"What strung you up like that is what I'd like to know;" came the voice of Grimm from behind Mariel.

"I thought I was dead for sure." said the man. "My name is Niro, and I'm a rogue, trying to find a way out of this cursed place."

"One of your friends?" Melvin asked Aaron, who shrugged. "Never seen him before in my life."

"There were so many of them." Niro continued. "But they didn't kill me. Huge spiders, with long talons and sharp fangs. They just spun me into their web and left through there." He pointed at the other door. Grimm went to the door, and opened it. Dark and damp was on the other side, but no sign of the huge spiders Niro had described.

"We really need to rest." Mariel pointed out. "I feel empty, drawn out, and in no position to fight giant spiders." she looked at Sir Jean, knowing that he already knew what they would be facing. She turned to Grimm, who had closed the door again so that nothing would come through without having to open it - or break through it - first. "How long have we been in here anyway?"

"A few days." Grimm estimated. It wasn't easy estimating the time underground with no sun or moon to guide you. Dwarves had an excellent sense of direction underground, and he was the one that was most at home beneath the fertile soil.

"Then we should rest again." Sir Jean said, making the decision for them. "Melvin, no fire. We shall have cold rations. Of course our presence here is noticed, but there is no reason why we should let them follow the scent of a cooking fire straight to us. I shall take first watch."

They shared their rations with Niro and Aaron; the latter happily took them before eating the ones he carried himself. The dungeoneer didn't seem to care much about what the inner workings of the party were, just as long as he could look around for loot - and get a huge share of it.

Directly after their sparse dinner, Mariel rolled herself into her blanket. She had healed second-degree burns on Sir Jean, after Melvin had thrown that lightning bolt at the kraken's eye. The electricity had also been conducted by Sir Jean's armour, and it had almost killed him. She had depleted her strength and used all her skill in healing to keep her party alive, and though she was happy not to have lost a single one of her patients, it left her very tired.

After breakfast, what they presumed was the next morning, they packed their gear again. Even Niro found his short sword back



again, it had been dangling high up in the cobwebs. Grimm opened the door to the next room, and they carefully explored it. It was a little room, but there was not much to be seen. The room after that, though, was a bit different. In the middle of it was a pit, like an arena, and when Melvin cast a Light in it, they could see it was filled with bones. Some of the bones were very small, like animal bones, but a lot of them were large enough to be humanoid. Scraps of clothing remained in the pit also, and an ugly horned helmet was a clue as to what had once entered the pit, but never got out again.

Leading away from the pit were a couple of tunnels, digging under the floor of the rooms they came from, and also forward, towards the rest of the as yet undiscovered dungeon.

"What do you think?" Grimm asked. He was in a cheerful mood, back underground and a dungeon possibly filled with enemies he could kill.

"I have an idea what might be in those tunnels." Sir Jean said. "And I am sure we shall not enjoy their company, if they decide to come out."

He looked meaningfully at Mariel, who nodded. She too, had a pretty good idea of what they would be up against.

But before they could move on again, there was a scuttling of feet. Melvin heard it first. He turned pale as a ghost, and grabbed the arm of Aaron, who was closest to him.

"Do you hear that too?" he asked urgently.

"No." Aaron said indignantly. "Let go."

They were all silent for a moment, and none heard it but Melvin, who shrugged. Then Mariel heard it too. "I hear it. Feet. Many, many feet."

Melvin nodded slowly, realizing only now that it was not an illusion. Grimm cocked his head, and pointed down into the pit, to one of the underground tunnels. "It's coming from there." he said, hefting his axe.

There was a soft hiss, like an indrawn breath flowing around sharp fangs. Something moved in the dark mouth of the tunnel. Instantly, Melvin made a complex gesture, like pushing something big away from him, and from his hands shot a tiny spark that blossomed into a Fireball at the mouth of the tunnel, just as the first of the giant spiders tried to get out.

"Bebeliths." hissed Mariel.

The bebeliths did not care for their fallen comrade and clambered awkwardly over the corpse. Its legs were sticking out at odd angles and the stench of singed flesh, scale, whatever it was that covered their bodies, filled the room.

Grimm scowled at the huge spiders, and swung his axe in a big arc, straight down into the face of the first spider that tried to clamber out of the pit. It shrieked, lost its footing in its panic, and fell back down, onto the rest of the writhing mass.

Sir Jean had some more problems. Two of the bebeliths had climbed half out of the pit, and the pinchers of one were closed around his upper leg. Only the platemail stopped the spider from biting Sir Jean's leg completely off. With his shield, Sir Jean kept the pinchers of the other bebelith at bay, while hacking at their unprotected heads. A masterful blow, and the first bebelith let go of his leg, shrieking a horrid squeal of agony as black blood gushed from a now empty eyesocket.

As soon as the bebeliths died, more climbed over their fallen comrades, but thanks to Melvin, who kept an eye on the tunnel entrances, and Aaron and Niro who were bouncing around, striking at unprotected legs and backs, they could keep the spider demons at bay.

When the last of the bebeliths died, Mariel rushed over to Grimm. A bite from one of the spiders looked really ugly, and Grimm could barely hold on to his axe. His arms seemed feeble, like all the strength had been drained from them, and his muscles looked smaller. Grimm himself was mumbling foul words under his breath.

Mariel checked his health, and cast a healing spell, and then healed the other party members, including Aaron and Niro, who had a scratch on his arm. Then she returned to Grimm. Though he was no longer wounded, he was still not recuperated from the bite.

"I don't understand." she said. "I healed you."

"What if the bite is poisonous?" Melvin asked.

"But you cleansed it...Prestidigation should work, probably better than regular water."

"I suppose," Sir Jean said; "that the poison already took hold. It demolished some of his muscle structure. There should be a spell to repair the damage."

"Ah, yes." Mariel replied. "True. But I can't cast it now, I asked my Goddess to grant me different spells today."

"Well, I can't go on like this. I can hardly lift my axe as it is." Grimm said. "Can you hurry it up? They might be back with their friends."

"I don't think I can sleep now." Mariel said.

"You should try." said Sir Jean. "I will scout ahead with Aaron. Niro, Melvin and Grimm will stay with you and keep an eye out. We shall not go too far ahead, but just to see if there are any bebeliths trying to sneak up on us."

Sir Jean handed her a blanket, and made sure Grimm was comfortable. Grimm sat with his back to the wall, holding his axe in his lap, though he could not lift it.

Mariel tried to close her eyes and sleep, but sleep came very slowly. The adrenaline in her body kept her awake for a long time. She could hear Sir Jean and Aaron return, and whisper to Grimm that all was well. She tried to drift like falling leaves, and finally reverie claimed her.

Aaron came shuffling back. "Guys, come look at this." he said, motioning with his left hand. Sir Jean and Grimm followed him closely, while Mariel and Niro covered the rear.

The tunnel they had entered was long and winding, with every so many yards an alcove. To the left was a small statue in the alcove, a human figure. To the right, an elf statue.

"What do you think it means?" Grimm asked.

Sir Jean frowned. "I am not sure."

Aaron walked on. "The next alcove has something that looks somewhat dwarvish, though it's not as ugly as Grimm. And this is a gnome of some sort."

"It can't be good." Mariel said. "I'm not happy with these, they should be destroyed."

"Hey wait a second, who knows what they do!" Grimm said.

"I agree with Mariel. These statues have a deeper meaning, and I think it is better if they were destroyed." said Sir Jean.

Grimm shrugged, his axe on his shoulder not impeding him in any way. Before he could argue more with her however, Mariel had dislodged the statue with her quarterstaff. The statue shattered on the floor. Sir Jean put his hand on top of the statue of the elf and waited a second before he toppled it off.

With a soft sigh, Mariel collapsed, suddenly unconscious. She had not been standing too close to the statue, but it was quite obvious that she had fainted because the elf statue had been destroyed.

"See! Now look what you've done." Grimm said, and started slapping Mariel in the face in an effort to bring her to. After a few moments, she came to again.

"What is the matter?" she asked, seeing all the concerned faces.

"You fainted when the statue shattered." Sir Jean said.

"What statue?" Mariel asked. She could not remember the alcoves or the statues. Melvin explained, while they walked to the next alcove.

"These statues?" Mariel asked. "I think you are right in destroying them. They obviously are linked to real people, and possibly even a way to control them."

They destroyed the rest of the statues they found, and walked through the tunnel. There was a tricky trap that Aaron had to dismantle, and though he survived it, he was hurt badly. Mariel healed him, though Aaron neither asked her for her help nor thanked her afterwards.

Then they entered a room. In it was an altar, surrounded by four pillars. The altar was impressive and intimidating. There were odd carvings on the side, and the name Bachtor was inscribed on it as well. Something that looked like dried blood was on the surface.

Sir Jean whistled through his teeth.

"And now you know why we should not utter that name too often;" Mariel said to Aaron and pointed at the altar; "It attracts attention, and by the looks of this, he is trying hard to become powerful. Very powerful."

"Yeah, yeah." Aaron said, not really listening. He was already at the next door. "Aren't you guys coming?"

"We have to destroy it." Mariel said, looking at Sir Jean. Grimm grunted and sighed, shrugging to Aaron as a sign that he was not about to interfere in divine business.

"I agree." Sir Jean said, nodding enthusiastically. "We can not leave this here."

Grimm sighed again, and motioned for Aaron to wait.

"Nah, it's alright, I'll check out if the next chamber is safe."

"No, we should all stand prepared." Sir Jean said. "There will be some protection on this altar."

"It's not likely to be unprotected, no." Mariel said. "I've never done this before, though I know how it's done. Whoever built this altar will try to disrupt our concentration so it can't be dismantled. We need you to look out for us, because we will be too busy to deal with it."

"Deal with what?" Melvin asked.

"The precautions that will be enabled as soon as we will start."

Grimm stood leaning against a pillar, looking at the altar. "Alright. But it's not worth dying for."

Neither Sir Jean nor Mariel answered him. They stood on either side of the altar. Mariel nodded that she was ready, and Sir Jean took the lead. Together, they focused all their power, their concentration, and their devotion to Good into the altar.

There was a slow rumble, almost lazy.

Melvin ducked his head slightly, ready to throw a Fireball should anything try to disturb Mariel and Sir Jean.



From the pillars, four darts sparked into existence, injuring Mariel and Sir Jean. They felt the pain, but they kept on focusing, determination giving them strength.

A few moments later, the rumble got louder. The pillars flared to life again, small imps appearing from the solid mass. Melvin was already casting before the one closest to him pulled free from the stone, and Grimm was in mid-swing, his axe shining in the torchlight. Niro struck at another, and Aaron's crossbow twanged, and then it was silent once more, except for the low rumbling noise.

In the middle of the altar, a huge glabrezu winked into existence. Mariel blinked, determined to finish this, here and now, and Grimm, who had been focusing on the pillars, so sure that the next threat would come from there, was slow to react. Slower than Aaron, who already was reloading his crossbow after having shot the glabrezu in the shoulder. Niro hacked at the its ankles, and then Grimm was there, even before the glabrezu had time to attack Sir Jean or Mariel. With a large crash, he tumbled off the altar, not disturbing what Sir Jean and Mariel were doing.

The rumble got louder. The noise was deafening now.

And then it was done. Sir Jean looked up, knowing that the altar would crumble to dust in a matter of seconds. He felt the ground beneath him move, and he jumped sideways, crashed to the stone floor. Somehow he got to his feet and ran on, Mariel at his side now, the stone floor crumbling under their boots as the floor fell away into a deep gaping hole almost as wide as the chamber itself.

In the next corridor, Grimm did a headcount. Everyone was there, dust-splattered and weary, but alert. They had all managed to get away from the crumbling pit. Grimm had been the last out the door, though the last few meters of the room were intact. The pit was deep, very deep, and the bottom was invisible in the gloom. At the walls there was a meter of floor left, a careful person could navigate around the pit if need be.

Slowly, the persistent rumble died away.

"Yes, they definitely know we're here now." Mariel said. Grimm snorted.

"Well done." Sir Jean said, clasping her armoured shoulder for a moment, then looking away again. Niro scouted ahead, and when he came back, Mariel was unconscious.

"We should rest." Melvin said.

"Agreed." said Sir Jean. "Secure a rope around the pit, so that we can safely get back to the other side. It is most likely more safe than this side of the pit, where we have not had a chance to take a good look around."

"Despite the bebeliths..." Niro said darkly.

They camped in the corridor before the altar-room because the air was less stuffy there. Sir Jean also said he wasn't sure what might climb out of the pit, since they could not see the bottom. They got around to distributing some items Grimm had found lying around in a hidden corner or had confiscated from Aaron. Melvin examined some of the items, handing a magic ring to Sir Jean. "I don't know what it does exactly, but it's got a nice shine. A good shine. Shouldn't be detrimental to your health, anyway."

The next morning, they crossed back to the other side of the altar room, and Aaron took the rope along, being the most agile person there. He danced across the ledge, scolding their frowns and smiling happily. He seemed to live for upsetting people, and if he would endanger his life in the process, well, so be it.

After a short fight with some naga's that came crawling out of a hole in the floor, they entered a great cavernous room. The ceiling stretched out far above them, and the walls had a hewn look, rougher than the rest of the tunnels and corridors. Grimm was the first to notice the bodies. A sadness came over him when he saw it.

"Oh Grimm, all those dwarves." Mariel sighed.

At their feet lay a long line of dwarves, all in heavy armour, skeletons and partially decayed or partially eaten. It looked like a battlefield.

"I wonder what killed them." said Melvin. "They're still in a line, like they are ready for battle."

"It must have been sudden." Niro said, and then pointed out a large tunnel that might give access to more bebelith tunnels. He shivered at the thought.

They encountered no more foes, not even a single bebelith, but at the end of the day Sir Jean and Mariel side-tracked to slay a chain devil that was locked in a room. Grimm picked up some more loot, mostly gold coins but also a new cloak for Melvin and a bag of holding. They camped there for what they presumed was the night. It was not in the middle of the corridor and no people would barge in on them if they were just passing through. It was remarkable in itself that there were no more enemies; all they had encountered so far were monsters of all sorts, but no humans as such.

The next day, they did. Aaron came back excitedly. "I found something!" he said in hushed tones. "This staircase leads down into a room, and there are a couple of people playing a game of sorts at a table."

"How many?" Grimm asked.

"Three, at least. I'll have another look to make sure, maybe I can see what they are by their clothes."

When he returned he had quieted down a bit. "There's a half-dragon with them, he entered through a door in the back of the room. There's also a small guy that looks like him." he poked a thumb over his shoulder at Melvin. "Spellcaster, so that will be tricky. And a huge armoured guy."

Sir Jean and Grimm went in the lead, followed by Melvin and Mariel. Trying very hard to be silent, but failing utterly. The soft clanking of their armour bounced off the walls of the narrow staircase and warned the people downstairs of their arrival. When they entered the room, there were only two people there. From one empty corner, however, came the spark of a Fireball. It bloomed on the stairs, Aaron and Niro diving aside in time, Melvin being only slightly singed in the process. He cursed, and made a complicated gesture with his hands. "I can't dispell it!" he shouted above the din. "I can't make him visible again."

Meanwhile, Grimm was taunting the orc fighter. It was trying to get to Sir Jean, who had been hit by the Fireball as well. Grimm stepped in the way while Mariel healed Sir Jean, and then she rushed over to Grimm as he in turn had been struck across the chest. Niro was darting in and out of the dancing shadows that were cast by the flickering torches. His sword failed to hit once, and then found a gap in between two plates of armour, though it didn't seem to hurt the orc much. Sir Jean, however, handily abused the distraction to strike at the orc. One, two perfect blows, and the orc bellowed in pain. Grimm struck with his axe and the orc went down.

There was a rushing of air, and Mariel picked herself up from the ground. In the back of the room, she could see the half-dragon drag the corpse of the orc away. She had kept her eyes on the orc, and had not even seen the spark of another Fireball coming. She had been hurt, unprepared for the flames. She muttered a healing spell, glancing around at the others. Niro was alright and not even singed. Aaron was throwing handfuls of flour on the floor. He shushed them, pointing at footprints that appeared in the white flour.

Grimm needed no more cue, swinging his axe furiously, he cut deep into the invisible spellcaster that had been betrayed by his footprints. With a squeal and a thud the small humanoid - a gnome - died. Another pair of footprints tried to escape to the staircase, but Sir Jean took care of that one. No more footprints appeared.

The door was closed again, and they eyed it warily.

"He'll be waiting for us." said Grimm. "You guys okay?"

Mariel checked them each in turn, healing where necessary.

When Grimm burst through the door, he gulped. The orc they had so much trouble killing, was standing again. The half-dragon stood half behind it, his arms raised to cast a spell. When Grimm stepped into the room, it exploded almost instantaneously. He growled in pain, and Sir Jean stepped around him, raising his sword to the ceiling and striking a mighty blow on the orc. It snarled, obviously badly hurt, but managed to parry the next blow. Aaron and Niro were trying to circle around, ready to step out of the shadows for a sneak-attack from behind. Aaron's crossbow twanged, the bolt burying deep in the orc's shoulder. Niro buried his sword into the kidney of the orc, who toppled over for a second time.

It was Grimm who finished off the half-dragon in the end. He was bleeding badly, and sank down next to the corpse. Only then did he notice a shimmering light. When the half-dragon had died, a portal had opened. It obstructed the doorway, shimmering slightly.

"Well, that is one way out." Melvin said drily.

It was Aaron who heard the feet this time. He had found that there was a gap big enough to squeeze through underneath the portal, and he'd gone back to the other room. He came back hurriedly. "Something's coming. Something with a lot of feet."

Niro looked around the room hurriedly, tapping the solid walls in the hope to find another exit. There were none. No doors, no hidden exits. Only the shimmering portal and a number of bebeliths approaching.

Grimm shouted for them to go, Melvin and Mariel shoved through by Sir Jean. A slight tingling, and they were out in the fields, nothing in sight for miles around. The only thing that proved there was a portal was another shimmering rectangle. Aaron and Niro followed, and then Grimm came stumbling through as if he had been shoved. Slow seconds passed. Finally, there was Sir Jean, covering their retreat.

It took a while for the bebeliths to follow them, but when they came, they rushed off into the distance, not daring to attack them.

They let them go, licking their wounds.

"Now what?" Grimm asked.

"Silver Spirit will find us." Sir Jean said confidently. "Let us make camp here. We will have to make do with our rations and blankets until the horses find us."

During the night, the portal vanished. And in the morning, at the bright dawn when Mariel sat down under a tree for her morning prayers, Silver Spirit lead the horses to them.